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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies two broad types of "critical" ethnographic research. One type attempts to empower social actors by providing emic-oriented accounts which tend to emphasize the integrity of their constructs, thus laying the groundwork for a redistribution of social power. The other type attempts to combine analysis of phenomenal, micro-level experience with macro-level structural influences on schooling. The paper shows how these trends are relevant to research in educational administration through combining a structural approach which stresses the allocative function of schools and Willis' (1977) framework for understanding practitioner ideology through an analysis of the official, pragmatic, and cultural levels of institutional life. (A 33-item reference list concludes the document.) (Author)

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TOWARD A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies two broad types of "critical" ethnographic research. One type attempts to empower social actors by providing emic-oriented accounts which tend to emphasize the integrity of their constructs, thus laying the groundwork for a redistribution of social power. The other type attempts to combine analysis of phenomenal, micro-level experience with macro-level structural influences on schooling. The paper shows how these trends are relevant to research in educational administration through combining a structural approach which stresses the allocative function of schools and Willis' (1977) framework for understanding practitioner ideology through an analysis of the official, pragmatic, and cultural levels of institutional life.

In recent years ethnographic research in education has become a hyphenated enterprise, and many may object to yet another adjective for ethnography. Furthermore, many may view the very idea of critical ethnography to be an epistemological contradiction. Although the term is currently in use as a genre of educational research (Everhart 1985, Lincoln and Guba 1985), the concern of this paper is not so much with promoting its continued use as in using it as a heuristic for exploring the recent proliferation of interpretive naturalistic studies which self-consciously attempt to give a "critical" dimension to their work. I will also explore in this paper the relevance of this form of inquiry for studies in the field of educational administration.

If, following Wolcott (1985), ethnography is defined not in terms of such issues as field technique or length of time in the field, but rather in terms of the centrality of a concern with culture, then the term ethnography is appropriate to describe this research. The culturalist turn among organizational theorists, feminists, critical theorists, and Marxists reflects a realization that social theory must be grounded in interpretive studies of social actors who are embedded in the cultural forms that give meaning to their behavior. As Willis (1977) has pointed out, it is the creativity at the level of culture which allows social actors to reflect or refute, accept or challenge,

the structural conditions which inform their lives. What makes an ethnography "critical" is somewhat more difficult to determine and will be a central concern of this paper.

Critical ethnographies in the field of of education appear to divide into two overlapping tendencies. One is primarily concerned with the relationship between human agency and the structural conditions mentioned above; the other largely ignores structural issues - or defines social structures differently - and views the "empowerment" of cultural informants as a central concern in ethnographic research. Both tendencies are linked by a concern with stressing the importance of human agency, challenging the status quo, and placing issues of school failure and social inequality at the center of their research programs. Thus they both reject a conservative functionalist approach to ethnography which according to Everhart (1979),

> ...is often used simply to describe why a given social or cultural setting maintains itself in the manner which it does, with little consideration for patterned inequalities, institutional power, ideologies, or the internal dynamics of how a system works and for whom the system is not functional. (p. 420)

The Empowerment of Cultural Informants

Reaching back to the Anthropological tradition of Malinowski and the more recent tradition of feminist (Luker, 1975) and constructivist research (Magoon 1977), studies concerned with the empowerment of cultural informants tend to emphasize the integrity of the constructs

of the informants themselves. Although advocacy of a phenomenological approach to educational research (Carini, 1975; Bussis et al., 1976) and organizational theory (Greenfield, 1973) has been prevalent for some time, advocacy of this approach in the name of "critical" research which "empowers" social actors through a redistribution of power is a more recent development.

Illustative of this concern for empowerment is the work of Mischler (1986) who has written extensively about the doctor/patient relationship. Mischler believes that most current research methods do not give voice to the concerns of social actors and the ways they construct meaning. With regard to research interviewing, he argues that researchers have tended to code the responses of cultural informants as if they existed independent of the contexts that produced them, and that instead of viewing the stories that repondents tell about their experience as digressions from the topic at hand, the researcher should, in fact, illicit such stories with the intent of submitting them to close narrative analysis in much the same way that a literary critic might approach a text.

> The effort to empower respondents and the study of their responses as narratives are closely linked. They are connected through the assumption...that one of the significant ways through which individuals make sense of and give meaning to their experiences is to organize them in a narrative form. As we shall see, various attempts to restructure the interviewee-interviewer relationship so as to empower respondents are designed to encourage them to find and speak in their own "voices." (p. 118)

Mischler goes on to cite several examples of studies in which respondents such as battered women, college students, and flood

victims were encouraged to become more active participants in discourse with researchers and practitioners, and further suggests a link to social action.

> There is, however, an additional implication of empowerment. Through their narratives people may be moved beyond the text to the possibilities of action. That is, to be empowered is not only to speak in one's own voice and to tell one's own story, but to apply the understanding arrived at to action in accord with one's own interests. (p.119)

Michler describes critical research as involving "critical reflection on the assumptions underlying one's methods and research practices within a commitment to humane values" (p. 142) For example, in his research on the doctor/patient relationship his particular intent was to critique the medical field's biomedical model and, by emphasizing the patients perspective, to promote a more humane clinical practice.

Similar work in a more interactionist vein has been done in the field of education. Erickson (1982) observed counselor-student interactions in a junior college and found that poor and minority counselees did not move successfully through the system, in part, because of a clash in interaction patterns with the largely middle class counselors. According to Erickson these counselors were generally unaware of their latent gatekeeper function. He suggests that in a broader context such gatekeeping may be highly functional.

> Since at the general societal level there is a scarcity of desired occupational slots, this kind of gatekeeping practice is "funcional." But is it societally desirable? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. The most fundamental value issue to be addressed is whether such de facto constraints on the educational and economic opportunity of members of the least privileged groups in the society are desirable or not. (Erickson, 1982, 194)

These studies suggest that not only does empowerment involve eliciting and respecting the integrity of cultural informants' constructs, but in many cases, such respect requires a gestalt-like shift in our understanding of those constructs. By understanding social actors in their own terms the apparently irrational takes on a certain rationality. The "lack of interest" of the minority child in classroom activities, the "neuroses" of suburban housewives, the "immaturity" of teenagers who get pregnant, the self-defeating behavior of the student counter-school culture, - all of these phenomena are rendered rational and even to some extent predictable when researchers understand the cultural context of social actors and approach them with a committment to the integrity of their own constructs.

Criticisms of Empowerment Studies.

A common criticism of "critical" ethnography concerned with empowerment is expressed by Argyris (1985), who, describing several descriptive as well as applied ethnographies, finds what she calls "the ethnographic approach to intervention and fundamental change"

unable to produce knowledge that can contribute to altering the status quo. She criticizes ethnographers for alienating practitioners by either requiring them to change social interaction patterns and acquire complex cultural knowledge without indicating how or whether this can be done, and for addressing domains which she considers to be out of the practitioner's control, ie. that they "change policy and/or society" (p. 176). She suggests as an alternative an "action science" approach grounded in clinical psychology.

Another critique would claim that these critical ethnographies assume that if we could eliminate such damning social processes as those between doctor and patient, and counselor and counselee, that we might be able to create a fairer meritocracy. They might argue that the most fundamental values issue is not, as Erickson suggests, the constraints on educational and economic opportunity, but rather the structural fact of "a scarcity of desired occupational slots" and the existence of structural unemployment, particularly among minority youth. They would perhaps further argue that phenomenological research and the micro-analyses of social interaction, like the more conservative varieties of functionalist analysis, often implicitly accept, but leave intact and largely undiscussed, ideological constructs such as "meritocracy," "opportunity," "excellence," and so on.

Those who make the latter criticism would object to the application of the term "critical" to the empowerment research described above. They might argue that what makes an ethnography "critical" is the attempt to combine analysis of phenomenal, micro-level experience with macro-level structural influences on schooling (Sharp & Green, 1975; West, 1984) This line of inquiry is largely the result of the recognition by many Marxists and feminists that the structural requirements of capitalism and patriarchy do not operate directly and rationally upon institutions and social actors to reproduce the social order. Rather there is a recognition that the apparent correspondence between the requirements of the school and the requirements of the workplace must not only be asserted and empirically demonstrated (Bowles and Gintis 1977, Anyon 1980) but that the process through which this occurs must also be explained through fine-grained accounts of social interaction grounded in the cultural context of social actors. Like those researchers concerned with empowerment, these researchers also stress the primacy of human agency in social explanation, however, they would argue that without a critique of social structure and the dominant ideology that sustains it, "empowerment" will amount to no more than a concern with a "fairer" distribution of achievement and failure within the existing structure. Since earlier works by Willis (1977) and Sharp and Green (1975) such critical ethnographies are becoming more common (Bullough,

Gitlin and Goldstein, 1984; Aggleton & Whitty, 1985, Ginsberg & Newman, 1985; Goodman, 1985).

Social Structure and the Allocation of Success and Failure

How then can ethnographers both respect the rationality of social actors and their way of constructing meaning while at the same time address the contradictions and distortions created by social structures? Stressing the allocative function of schooling, Feinberg (1983) points out that for the educational system as a whole to succeed - that is, to achieve its goal of reproducing the current division of labor in society - it is necessary that some parts of the system fail. Feinberg adds,

> The failure to distinguish between the goals of schooling as related to a particular transaction between a teacher and a child in an individual school and the general goals of the school system itself functions to shield from examination the interrelationship between school and society. Yet it is important to realize that the goals that are established by individual members of the school system are done so in terms of their congruence with some aspect of the goals of the system as a whole. Whether it could in fact be otherwise is a difficult question to answer, but the recognition of this attempt to establish congruence should lead to an examination and evaluation of the systemic goal of schooling. (p. 84)

It is this attempt to establish congruence with goals whose logic operates differently at different levels of the institution that creates dilemmas for practitioners.

That schools serve an allocative function which is tied to the structural requirements of the economic system has been recognized at least since Talcott Parsons' functional analyses of schooling. There is nothing radical in the concept of an allocative function since all societies have mechanisms for sorting its members into work roles. In most modern societies schools have come to serve this function. What is generally not stressed however, is that while schools serve as allocators of achievement, they also serve as allocators of failure. Because most metropolitan areas are segregated by social class, it is not uncommon to find schools in suburban communities that are almost exclusively in the business of allocating achievement and success while schools in many urban nieghborhoods have become allocators of failure. This tendency becomes even more pronounced as one moves up the grades from elementary to middle and high school. Although racial desegregation has alleviated the situation in some urban areas with regard to race, it has only indirectly addressed segregation based on social class. The positive allocative function of suburban schools is generally not only acknowledged, but promoted by realtors who know that when their clients with children buy a house in suburbia, they are also purchasing the services of a school whose function is to allocate success.

Although the allocation of success and failure is evident when comparing suburban to inner-city schools, not all schools are so

clearly segregated along social class lines. In fact, it is quite common to find equal representation of social classes within school districts, and, particularly at the high school level, within schools. In such cases the allocation of success and failure is generally achieved through tracking. (Oakes, 1985) In such schools allocation is achieved, not at the level of the school, but rather at the level of the classroom.

As we move closer to a two class society (Ehrenreich, 1986) the allocative function of schooling is becoming more pronounced. The legitimation crisis of inner city schools was perhaps alleviated by the effective schools movement which provided both improved methods of social control and new hope for real school improvement, but in an era of enrichment of the few and greater impoverishment for the many, it is becoming increasingly difficult for administrators to ignore high drop out and truancy rates, increases in teen pregnancy, and increased drug use. Although these phenomena are not exclusive to schools which allocate failure, they are significantly more prevalant there and can be interpreted as desperate messages from young people who, unlike their college-bound suburban counterparts, do not see a bright future ahead of them.

Why do principals - particularly those whose schools allocate failure - willingly preside over and legitimate this allocative function? Willis (1977) provides a framework for understanding practitioner ideology by distinguishing between what he calls the official, pragmatic, and cultural levels of institutiones. According to Willis,

> At the OFFICIAL level an institution is likely to have a formal account of its purpose in relation to its view of the main structural and organizational features of society and how they interrelate...At the PRAGMATIC level, official ideologies and aims are mediated to the agents and functionaries of particular institutions. They are likely to appreciate something of the more theoretical rationale for the prevailing or coming official ideology, but they are mainly interested in their own face to face problems of control and direction and the day to day pressures of their own survival within the inherited institution. They run a practical eye over 'official' ideology. (p. 177)

Willis' official level corresponds to what Feinberg calls the goals of the entire school system. In a liberal democracy among the goals operating at the official level is the provision of equal access to educational and work opportunities. It is at the level of individual schools and classrooms, however, where a more pragmatic logic takes over. Johnston (1985) also looks at institutional levels stressing at the official level the dominance of what he calls "bureaucratic centralist authoritarianism" rather than liberal democratic ideology.

Although Willis relates the cultural level to the adaptive behavior of the institution's clients, it can as well refer to the norms and beliefs that arise from the various subcultures of which the practitioners are a part - ie., social class culture, school culture, occupational culture, etc. and their interplay with ideologies operating at the official and pragmatic levels.

Thus, the overlapping of a powerful OFFICIAL ideology, an immediate PRAGMATIC need to resolve daily face-to-face problems, and CULTURAL norms and beliefs deriving from local school culture, social class background, and other subcultures of which the practitioner is a

member provide the practitioner with a complex and inchoate social reality from which he or she must extract a rationale for his or her actions. The practitioner, then, cannot be blamed for possessing contradictory goals and rationales which s/he uses in different contexts - one for drafting the school's mission statement, another for dealing with the daily pressures of the job, and yet another for the subculture of the teachers' lounge.

If the problem were simply one of different levels of institutional analysis then interpretation would be relatively easy and practitioners could rationally analyze the sources of their ideological dilemmas. It is however the various cultural norms and beliefs that practitioners bring with them that makes analysis difficult.

For example, the middle class origins of many principals, teachers, and guidance counselors in schools that allocate failure often make it difficult for them to appreciate the quite rational decision-making processes of their students. Such practitioners seldom live in the communities where they work and they seldom have a realistic view of the life chances of their students. They often bring an optimism to the school which is grounded in the realities of the communities in which they live. Meanwhile, those principals, teachers and guidance counselors who grew up in poverty but who have "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps" are caught in an even more difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they rightly view themselves as much needed positive models for their students to emulate, while at the same time they unintentionally serve to legitimate a system of

structural inequality and cause their students to internalize their failure by implying that those who don't "make it" have only themselves to blame. The same principal who brags to his or her students that when s/he went to college there was no such thing as grants-in-aid, is often the same principal who will, with no sense of irony, recount school demographics similar to the following: 95% of students on free and reduced lunch programs, an average 40% truancy rate (This is conservative for some inner-city middle and high schools) and 5% college bound students. To complicate the issue further, the heavily male-dominated occupational subculture of principals has created a series of norms and beliefs that encourage a certain bravado about being able to "handle" a tough school. During a recent informal gathering of high school principals, one principal commented that if he were given just one month at the school under discussion that he "would have that school so tight you could hear it squeek."

The meshing, then, of these various cultural norms with conflicting goals at different institutional levels provides at the same time a conceptual framework and a challenge to critical ethnographers.

Social Structure and Double-Loop Learning

What this paper suggests is that any concept of empowerment for school administrators must involve a kind of reflection-in-action that allows for reflection on the structural conditions within which the administrator functions. This seems to be in part what Argiris et al. (1985) intend with the concept of action science with its emphasis on intervention strategies and "double-loop learning". Such learning involves a shift of focus from means to ends. Briefly, practitioners' action strategies are governed by variables that represent valued ends which actors seek to realize. When an action does not result in the intended consequences, practitioners have a tendency to engage in single-loop learning; that is, they simply try a different action strategy. In double-loop learning the practitioner examines and perhaps seeks to change the governing variables that initially led to the failed action strategy. Viewing governing variables as ends open to analysis, rather than as constraining forces, could empower practitioners to challenge issues relating to organizational and social structure.

Double-loop learning and reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983) promise to make an important contribution toward a new epistemology of practice in educational administration. However, in spite of references to the Habermasian goal of undistorted communication, they offer few mechanisms by which practitioners can reflect on the structural conditions that inform their practice. Critical ethnography, on the other hand, by combining emic and etic constructs

can provide such a mechanism. Unless ethnographers both speak to the understandings of administrators and relate those understandings to structural, institutional, and cultural processes, they will continue to view organizational contexts merely as environmental threats to the maintenance of organizational stability and the status quo. Foster (1984), makes a similar point

> For now a critical administration must evidence a great concern for the relationship between external and internal structures, viewing schooling as a mediator between these and administration as a force which can serve a negative function in exposing contradiction and distortions and a positive function in attempting to develop an 'objectively' rational basis for schooling....This in turn means abandoning an instrumentally rational approach to administration - how is control most effectively established? - in favor of a more substantive rationality - what and why do we administer?

Conclusion

If the effective schools research rescued educational practitioners from the malaise that followed the Coleman report, won't viewing administrators and teachers as legitimators of structural inequality, as this paper suggests, be a blow to the morale of the profession? After all, in an effort to combat such a malaise, Edmonds (1978) found that some inner-city schools were doing a better job of educating children than others and set out to discover why this was so. His research indicated that principals can make a difference in the quality of education students receive. Erickson (1986) makes a similar point when he criticizes radical research that focuses on

structural inequality, pointing out that differences in student achievement between classrooms with similar socioeconomic backgrounds indicates that teachers also make a difference.

In light of such findings, the question for researchers and educational administrators may well be; How can we promote the best education possible for children within the constraints of structural inequality, while at the same time reorient our professional role toward one of advocacy of policies that seek to change it. If as Lipsky (1979) suggests, building-level school practitioners are "street level bureaucrats", then we must begin to ask the kinds of questions that other street-level bureaucrats such as social workers have been asking for some time. Are we empowering our clients or is our role one of social control and legitimation? (Piven & Cloward, 1971) Perhaps this is not an either/or question, but it certainly has a place in research in the field of educational administration that calls itself critical. To the extent that such research is grounded in ethnographies that seek to understand how administrators make sense of social reality, it will perhaps promote the kind of reflection-in-action that will empower administrators to seek a role in policies leading to fundamental change.

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